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ABSTRACT

It is reasonable to argue that the members of a profession are the only ones who can directly address issues of accreditation. In the context of accreditation for international continuing education, it may be argued that professional organizations in continuing education cannot function as accrediting bodies except in the sense that they determine and apply criteria for admission to their own organization. The field of continuing education is too variable and in too much flux to be captured in a set of prescriptions. Some have suggested that approaches comparable to the International Organization for Standardization's ISO 9000 standards in the international exchange of goods and services be considered as a way of certifying the quality of intellectual commodities. Several years ago, the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE) was created to establish procedures for accreditation of electronically delivered continuing education programs. However, already-existing accreditation agencies in the United States seriously questioned the need for GATE. Similarly, an interlocking web of existing professional disciplinary societies and institutional accrediting agencies, such as the Association Mexicana Educacion Continua, University Continuing Education Association, Canadian Association for University Continuing Education, and University Continuing Education Network, can meet the need for accreditation of international continuing education. (MN)

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Professional Accreditation for International Continuing Education

A Paper Presented at the Association Mexicana Educacion Continua (AMEC) Conference

September 11-13, 2002
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Introduction and Background

The subject of continuing education accreditation is inextricably bound to concerns for quality. For example, accreditation in its most simple and direct form presumes a yardstick against which we are able to judge. Accreditors act with confidence that they can make comparisons against this standard for purposes of evaluation. It is reasonable to argue that professionals, that is members of a profession, are the only ones who can directly address issues of accreditation. This is true even in the case of regulatory agencies that are enforcing standards created by the profession and its members.

The existence of regulatory standards assumes that appropriate criteria exist and can be articulated, and most important for the regulators, can be fairly applied. By way of comparison, while the Hippocratic Oath in medicine may be a maxim of good practice, it is not a criterion for accreditation. The more complex and problematic a profession, the less likely an outside group of regulators (that is people who are not members of the profession) will be able to make critical decisions of assessment and evaluation, unless a perfect evaluative template can be created and unambiguously applied

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So, returning to the subject of professional accreditation for international continuing education, how do we proceed?

A Profession and Professionals

Is it correct to think of continuing education as a profession? According to some, any field that has a distinct body of knowledge acquired through means of advanced study, and that can be codified and transmitted, qualifies under this rather elastic definition. Of course continuing education is a profession. But only for those who truly think of it (and practice it) as such. It will be helpful to hold in mind the image of a continuum of continuing education practice ranging from the most amateurish and uncommitted to the most rigorous, reflective, and dedicated.

The goal of continuing education professionalization is promoted by the associations in continuing education and their members. These organizations conduct and sustain ongoing dialogues and reflection on the nature of adult education practice, contribute to the socialization of new members, publish journals and reports, and convene meetings and conferences. And within the organizations (which tend to be context specific) there is unusual consensus on what constitutes "good practice." But even then it is neither unanimous nor without controversy. For this reason professional organizations in continuing education cannot function as accrediting bodies, except in the sense that they determine and apply criteria for admission to their own organization. The field of continuing education is just too variable (and in flux) to be captured in a set of prescriptions.

The Nature of the Continuing Education Field

We need to keep in mind the supportive and subsidiary role of continuing education within most higher education institutions. Except, of course, for those institutions created specifically for the education of adults. In all other cases continuing education is intended to advance institutional goals including enrollment, income generation or outreach. The mission of continuing education for that college or university is determined by institutional leaders, and not by the adult education profession, *per se*. When the institution is recruiting a new continuing education dean or director it is not axiomatic that the pool of candidates will be drawn from those within the core of the continuing education field, that is candidates who strongly identify with the field and who have significant experience as continuing education professionals.

How then can the new dean or director function as a "professional" or "member of a profession"? What customarily occurs in those instances is that the new dean/director is "professionalized" through contact with more experienced staff members and through interaction with the respective professional organization. It is a form of "on the job" training. If a profession cannot control entry into its field, especially at the highest levels, how can it realistically be expected to establish standards for accreditation?

ISO 9000 for International Continuing Education?

The widespread acceptance of ISO 9000 standards in the international exchange of goods and services has led to the consideration of comparable approaches to the delivery of other intellectual commodities. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that ISO in reality addresses process quality control – not each and every product or service. A notable reminder of this was that several years ago the Firestone Tire Company, although ISO Certified, produced thousands of sub-standard tires that led to significant damage claims and the bankruptcy of the

company. I can vividly recall a photo in the New York Times of the Firestone Headquarters and its ISO sign, while the accompanying story detailed the bankruptcy proceedings!

We need to pay greater attention to recognizing and achieving excellence in our field even though there may be considerable differences of opinion on what constitutes the highest levels of continuing education achievement. Consider the fact that ISO templates do not directly assess customer satisfaction. Could a continuing education director omit this important criterion when evaluating his or her programs? Could any form of international accreditation reliably address student perceptions without taking into account national cultural traditions and different educational systems? On the other hand, the search for reliable standards of quality cannot and should not be avoided.

The Example of GATE

A few short years ago the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE) was created with offices in Washington, DC. GATE's goal was to establish procedures for the accreditation of electronically delivered continuing education programs so that consumers would have some assurance of quality for "foreign" institutions with which they were not directly familiar. GATE perceived an accreditation vacuum or gap between various national standards of accreditation and wanted to be able to "translate" these varying approaches into a single international standard- an *Esperanto* of accreditation, if you will.

A spirited counterattack mounted by already existing accrediting agencies in the USA seriously questioned the need for GATE. The recognized accrediting agencies argued that a new accrediting agency was not required. Rather, agreements between accrediting agencies addressing academic disciplines, professional areas, and institutions would reliably assure the public of quality distance education programs.

Does the same reasoning apply to international continuing education? Can we address standards and quality through existing agencies and mechanisms? I believe that we can and that this need for assuring quality can be met through an interlocking web of professional disciplinary societies and institutional accrediting and regulatory agencies, both regional and national.

Conclusions

The role for professional associations in continuing education within this archipelago of accreditation becomes complementary. By advocating, recognizing and suitably rewarding outstanding examples of good practice; by providing forums (print, electronic, and real-time) for the exchange of new ideas and information, and by offering meaningful opportunities for leadership development AMEC, the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA), the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE) and the University Continuing Education Network (UCEN) - to cite just a few of the most prominent continuing education associations- contribute the field specific expertise other associations for accreditation in higher education lack.

Through our own commitment to maintaining an active and ongoing international dialogue on quality in continuing education all of us can strengthen our field. This is professionalism of the highest order and will ensure the viability of international continuing higher education in the centuries ahead.

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